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ABSTRACT

The "Early Childhood/Teen Communications Project" conducted a pilot investigation of two grade 7-8 combination classes at a K-12 alternative school in Seattle, Washington. The students (approximately 55) were given the opportunity to work with media literacy materials over a four-week period for about 1.5 hours each day. This paper describes the students' responses to advertising before, during, and after working with the material. The set of questions that organized the study described in this paper was: What media literacy skills did the students possess prior to, during and after using media literacy materials? Would students see and hear more details in advertisements after working with media literacy materials for four weeks? Would there be any shifts in their opinions and interpretations? Would their abilities to analyze (see and hear details) evaluate (interpret messages) and reflect (decode and consider the impact of messages on others and themselves) change? Using an instrument the authors developed as a means of analyzing and discussing students' conversations about media and advertising, they looked at what students see and hear in advertising as well as what interpretive and analytical levels they can achieve through discourse. Findings indicated that most students process media messages at a basic informational level. There are, however, a few examples of critical, reflective responses. A teacher's questioning style is crucial in helping students to enter a reflective domain and exposure to media literacy materials improved the students' observational skills as well as their ability to interpret constructed media messages. (Contains 12 references and 2 tables of data.) (Author/RS)

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Media Literacy as Discourse

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Media Literacy as Discourse

ABSTRACT

The *Early Childhood/Teen Communications Project* conducted a pilot investigation of two grade 7-8 combination classes at a K-12 alternative school in Seattle, Washington. The students (approximately 55) were given the opportunity to work with media literacy material over a four-week period for about 1.5 hours each day. This paper describes the students' responses to advertising before, during, and after working with the material.

The set of questions that organized the study described in this paper was: What media literacy skills did the students possess prior to, during and after using media literacy materials? Would students see and hear more details in advertisements after working with media literacy materials for four weeks? Would there be any shifts in their opinions and interpretations? Would their abilities to analyze (see and hear details) evaluate (interpret messages) and reflect (decode and consider the impact of messages on others and themselves) change?

Using an instrument we developed as a means of analyzing and discussing students' conversations about media and advertising, we looked at what students see and hear in advertising as well as what interpretive and analytical levels they can achieve through discourse. We found that most students process media messages at a basic informational level. There are, however, a few examples in our study of critical, reflective responses. A teacher's questioning style is crucial in helping students to enter a reflective domain and exposure to media literacy materials improved the students observational skills as well as their ability to interpret constructed media messages.

Media Literacy as Discourse

Penelope Karovsky, PhD David Holliway, PhC

Introduction

North American advertisers spend billions of dollars each year on ads targeted at youth for, as an article in *Businessweek* notes, if you "make friends with teenagers now you may have customers for life."(1994). Furthermore, the world wide web provides advertisers with unrestricted opportunities to assimilate youth into an international market collective. The overarching goal of *the Early Childhood/Teen Communications Project (ECTCP)* is to develop a critical consciousness among youth particularly in the area of advertising: to teach them critical questioning and reflection skills to unpack and resist the commercial messages that, increasingly segment, package and sell them to advertisers (Masterman, 1997).

Within this commercialized milieu can youth are often described as being "media savvy," in other words, as having an understanding of media that other generations lack. Is this accurate or does this term simply refer to their ability to surf the net or parrot advertising jingles rather than understanding and evaluating media messages, i.e., media literacy. Competent, independent, considered choices require students able to actively reflect on the hundreds of media messages they receive daily, yet many students graduate from school incorporated into an ideology of consumerism and immediate self gratification without having attained vital critical reflective skills. Media literacy, however, is one strategy with which educators can arm students, enabling them to "read" (access, analyze, interpret) and "write" (produce) media messages.

In this paper we discuss a small study we conducted with two grade 7-8 combination classes at a K-12 alternative school in Seattle, Washington. The students (approximately 55) were given the opportunity to work with media literacy materials over a four-week period for about 1.5 hours each day. The material was extracted from a video-based curriculum, *Sex, Media and You* (ECTCP, 1995). This curriculum focuses on promoting media literacy and health education by supporting, fostering, and making use of youth driven media projects as a strategy for promoting healthy choices. The

curriculum requires hands-on involvement by students who learn to read then ultimately write their own media projects.

The study

Literacy is the ability to interpret and produce meaningful messages. Meaningful messages are created through "primary" and "secondary" discourses. A primary discourse is acquired in the early years of life primarily within the family and its cultural environment. Secondary discourses are learned within a variety of sources outside of the home involving peers, non-family adults, groups and organizations (Gee, 1996, p. 137) "Discourses create 'social positions' (perspectives) from which people are "invited" (summoned) to speak, listen, act, read and write, think, feel, and believe."(Gee, 1996, p. 128) Foundational to this study is media literacy as a discourse as part of the constitutive, consensual world of language with which we create our reality and our concepts of ourselves.

The set of questions that organized our investigation was:

1. What media literacy skills did the students possess at the outset of this study?
2. Would students see and hear more details in advertisements after working with media literacy materials for four weeks?
3. Would there be any shifts in their opinions and interpretations?
4. Would their abilities to analyze (see and hear details) evaluate (interpret messages) and reflect (decode and consider impact of messages on others and themselves) change?

Guided by the work of Roy Fox (1996) and as a means of analyzing and discussing the observational data collected from students, we developed an instrument—media literacy discourse chains—that provides a framework for describing how the students process media messages, particularly advertising. The disciplinary principles underlying the analysis of the data include media literacy as discourse (e.g. cultural codes, beliefs, conventions), semiotics (e.g. association, transfer), reader-response literary theory (e.g. transaction between reader and text) and critical thinking. Funding limitations precluded our conducting one-on-one interviews or focus groups with all the

students involved in the study. We elected, therefore, to develop a survey in order to collect some representative data from each student. We anticipated that this method would allow us to answer, to some extent, questions 1, 2, and 3.

Sources of Data

- Two focus group sessions

With the help of the teacher, six students were selected for the focus group: three from the morning class and three from the afternoon class. We met with this group twice for a period of one hour in the second and fourth week of the study. Focus groups are a logical choice for this kind of study as they allow the researcher to capture the fluid, emotional, even volatile nature of students' interactions with commercials. We tried to set up a relaxed atmosphere in which all questions and answers would be regarded as legitimate. We brought food and sodas for the students and spent the first 10 minutes chatting about the material they had been covering in class and answering any questions they had about our project and the University. We guaranteed the students anonymity and explained that the recordings we took would only be heard by ourselves and were strictly for the purpose of recalling and reflecting on their remarks.

- In-class observations

In weeks one and three we observed both the morning and the afternoon class over two class periods (about 1.5 hours). During these sessions, which were taped, we did not interact with the class unless invited to do so by the teacher. Our purpose was to observe how the students reacted to the media literacy materials with which they were working and to occasionally record their responses to their teacher's or peer's questions and remarks.

- Conversations with teacher and students

The authors had a number of informal encounters with the students and the teacher between classes. Remarks and observations were recorded for later consideration. These encounters helped us to "flesh out" our understanding of the instructional environment. We attempted to find out how

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students felt about the issues they were discussing, whether they enjoyed (were engaged by) the exercises in the curriculum, if they considered the experience fun, worthwhile, etc.

- Two surveys (pre and post)

Prior to their first experience with the media literacy curriculum material, both groups of students (one morning and one afternoon class) were shown a current TV advertisement and given a written survey to complete. The teacher administered the surveys giving students directions, reading the questions out loud, answering inquiries, and encouraging students to write down their own ideas. At the end of the four-week experience with the media literacy material, this procedure was repeated with both groups using the same TV advertisement and the same survey. We attempted to make this measure as open-ended and easy to use as possible. We have a relatively long-standing working relationship with the teacher involved in this study and were able to ascertain the broad range of reading levels in his classes before putting together the survey. We chose to use multiple choice questions (see Tables 1 and 2 for examples of the questions) and instructed the teacher to give students as much assistance as he felt they needed in order to avoid their not responding to a question simply because they could not read or comprehend the question.

Analysis of Data

- The two focus group sessions were transcribed word-for-word and then we analyzed them using the instrument we had developed—media literacy discourse chains.
- At the close of the study, we compared our notes and discussed the in-class observations we had made.
- The pre-post survey questions were analyzed using frequency measures.

Findings

Discussion of focus groups

With the help of the teacher, six students were selected for the focus group discussions. The focus groups met twice for an hour long discussion. We were interested in seeing if students could see and

hear details in media messages, if they could decode and interpret these messages, and to what extent they could evaluate the impact the messages had on others and themselves.

Focus group two: Niketown

In the second focus group we watched a five minute video on "Niketown." After watching the video, students were encouraged to dissect, analyze, critique, and interpret all elements of the ad. For the purposes of this discussion, we asked the students to think as if they were advertisers. We asked them to consider the following questions as they watched a short video segment on Niketown:

- What details, objects, and language would you need to create a convincing advertisement? Why? (L_2)
- What associations does Nike use? Why? (L_2)
- Why do the advertisers use terms like Niketown instead of Nike store? (L_2)
- What messages do they construct in this video? (L_2)

At the end of the segment, we had the students brainstorm. We encouraged them to say anything that came to mind as they remembered the video. Once again, the majority of their responses were at Levels 1 and 2, however some students were able to move to Level 3 both in their responses and questions more frequently than at the first session.

One of the more insightful exchanges the students had was on the interior architecture in Niketown.

RL_2: *What about this Niketown and town square and pavilion?*

S_1L_2: *it makes you feel like there's a whole world here... I'm comfortable and I can go to this place ..*

S_2L_2: *yea, they make you all comfortable so you'll stay ...*

S_3L_3: *the other thing is that this is a store where the parents and the kids can both be interested, you know, it's not very often that you can go to the store and you*

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know, a teenager and their dad...usually, they don't have the same interests and stuff, but you go to Niketown and everybody can be happy...

S_4L_2: *it feels like, wow I'll go to Niketown...*

S_2L_3: *we'll go to Niketown together and it will be a family thing...*

Several students reflections of the commercial intentions of Niketown were insightful:

S_3L_3: *it's hard to think because they have like huge stores everywhere , then they have 20 pavilions and then they have 7 thousand people going in there a day and everything is about Nike...and almost all of them are probably buying stuff...can you imagine how many people go in there?... it's a whole store with like all Nike stuff, you can't get out of there without getting something...*

S_1L_3: *It's mental. It's all mental. It goes into your brain, you see, you sit in front of your TV and you don't acknowledge it, you know, you see an ad for a shoe that costs... usually it doesn't even say the cost...usually it's just like blah blah and then you go to the shoe store and then you say, wow. I saw this. it must be a good shoe! ...*

S_3L_3: *and you don't ever remember why...*

In summary, we learned that students are excellent observers of advertisements in terms of details and facts. They rarely proceed beyond these two levels of processing, however, unless encouraged and guided with critical questions to evaluate and reflect on the impact of the media messages on their peer group and themselves.

In-class observations

We conducted four in-class observations of the two classes. Our purpose in observing classroom interactions was exploratory. We were interested in seeing how these kids interacted with one another in the context of media discussions and how they responded to the media literacy materials.

In the first class session, the students were given a variety of magazine ads. They were divided into groups and asked to notice details such as the people in the ad, the setting of the ad, and possible messages conveyed by the ad's images. In the second class session, students read a *Businessweek* article from the *Teen Aware* curriculum resource guide. The article argued that students of the 90's have different outlooks from students in the past because everyday life is presently saturated by mass media. The students were asked to reflect on the accuracy of the claims made in the article in relation to their own life experiences.

We analyzed the transcriptions recorded from these observations using the same discourse tool used with the focus groups and once again found that many of the students were experts at noticing detail. The student responses were overwhelmingly at the informational and interpretive levels (Levels 1 and 2). The most striking observation was the lack of reflective responses offered by the students. In fact, the tone of many students response was, "we know this, we've seen it all before. It doesn't have any thing to do with me."

One interesting occurrence, however, seems to belie their seemingly indifferent attitude. While discussing an ad about make-up and feminine physical appearance, we observed a girl from one group unconsciously and without missing a conversational beat, take out a compact, unfold the little mirrored lid, peer in and make a minor adjustment to her hair, powder her nose, close the lid and slip the compact back into her purse all the time continuing with the mocking-like discussion of how some women use too much make-up. This brief observation seems to point to the subtle but penetrating impact media messages have on some students concept of self.

Initial survey

The students were shown a current TV advertisement for *Boston Market* (a fast-food chain) and asked to respond to 13 questions. All but two of the questions were multiple choice in that the students were directed to circle appropriate words or phrases in response to questions. Of the remaining two questions, in one the students were asked to write down descriptive words and the other to finish an incomplete sentence. The elements of the ad include:

- a group of teens and a teen couple all in black and white: they are thin, even gaunt, look pensive and speak in subdued tones. Their two spoken phrases are, *life is so empty* and *there's a burning from within.*
- an adult man in color who conveys a "no nonsense" message in an upbeat voice. His initial response to the teens' despondent words is, *eat something* and then he continues with a description of *Boston Market's* special food offer.
- the *Boston Market* logo, and food items all in color.
- the adult, lying down with the now prone teens at the close of the ad, once again talking to them.

The results of the initial survey are divided into three sections:

1. the students ability to see and hear details,
2. to interpret messages, and
3. to reflect on the meaning of the messages in terms of their peers and themselves.

Only the percentages for the appropriate answers to the questions are reported in the ensuing tables and discussions.

Table 1: Ability to See and Hear Details

Morning group %	Survey Question	Afternoon group %
	Circle the parts of the ad that you remember were in color	
79	the food	74
88	the adult	88
	Which of these phrases did you hear at the beginning of the ad	
25	Life is so empty	17
88	There's a burning from within	79
	Were all the voices the same or did you hear different voices? Circle the words that describe the voices you heard	
88	down, bored or sad	100
21	up, excited, happy, joking or laughing	8
	How do we find out what this ad is for? Do we see the advertiser's	
58	name	73
25	logo	73
	Does the advertiser have	
54	a jingle	58
8	special colors	12
63	a famous spokesperson	62
	If I went to Boston Market my order would	
63	look the same	81
25	cost the same	19
38	taste the same	23

Most of the students recognized the advertiser's use of color to highlight certain elements of the ad—the adult and *Boston Market* food products—against the grayness of the teen couple and teen group. In addition, most were able to correctly identify the phrase "there's a burning from within," spoken by a female teen yet they did not seem to notice the simpler phrase "life is so empty." Similarly, nearly all heard the teen voice which was subdued and sad but not the joking, happy adult voice.

In terms of product identifiers the afternoon class fared a little better than the morning in that about three-fourths noticed that the ad included the advertiser's name and logo whereas only 58% of the morning class noticed the name and only 25% the logo. Most of the students in both classes correctly noted that the music heard with the ad was not the advertiser's special jingle and that they were not using a famous spokesperson. They were unsure, however about the colors and in both classes less than ten percent correctly answered that the ad did not use special colors.

Ability to Interpret Messages

First we asked the students to identify the ad's target audience from the following categories: everyone, adult women, adult men, teen girls, teen guys, preteen girls, preteen guys. Neither class recognized themselves (teen girls, teen guys) as the possible target audience. Most chose the "everyone" category suggesting that they were unaware of the fact that advertisements are carefully constructed messages designed to appeal to specific audiences.

Next we asked them to categorize the adult man in the ad: TV announcer, teacher, BM Manager, famous person. Neither group was able to settle on any one classification. The majority of the morning group favored TV announcer (63%) while the afternoon group chose BM manager (50%). This suggests that the morning group don't recognize any relationship between the spokesperson and the product whereas the afternoon class are beginning to see this connection.

In Table 1 we noted that the students did not appear to hear the adult voice which clearly has implications for their ability to interpret the message. One way of interpreting the ad is that adults can come up with a practical, affordable solution to teenage angst—eating at *Boston Market*. However, this message would evade the students who ignored the adult or did not notice the tone of his voice.

Ability to Reflect on Meaning of Message in Terms of Peers and Themselves

Question 12 on the survey reads:

Why do you think the man lies down on the floor at the end of the ad?

- he is tired
- he wants to talk to the teens
- he wants to be like the teens
- he is making fun of the teens

The students' interpretation of this event was initially quite surprising. Sixty seven percent of the morning group responded that they thought he was making fun of the teens compared to only 21% who thought he wanted to talk to the teens or be like them. Upon reflection, however, it seems that this response typifies the morning group's egocentricity, i.e., their almost exclusive focus on the teens in the ad. This interpretation is supported by the fact that they thought the ad was for everyone, did not notice the adult voice and assigned the man the detached role of TV announcer.

The afternoon group had a different response. Only 38% thought he was making fun of the teens compared to 46% who thought he wanted to talk to the teens or be like them. Although the majority of this group thought the ad was for everyone, almost half also selected teen girls and guys as the target audience. They too did not hear the adult voice but were able to make a connection between the spokesperson and the product and perhaps it was because of this connection that they interpreted his action more as an attempt at communicating with teens than making fun of teens.

Post survey

Once again, following the four-week exposure to media literacy materials, the students were shown the *Boston Market* advertisement and asked to respond to the same 13 questions.

The results of this survey are divided into three sections:

1. changes in the students ability to see and hear details,
2. to interpret messages, and
3. to reflect on the meaning of the messages in terms of their peers and themselves.

Only the percentages for the appropriate answers to the questions are reported.

Table 2: Changes in Ability to See and Hear Details

Morning group Pre	% Post	Survey Question	Afternoon group Pre	% Post
		Circle the parts of the ad that you remember were in color		
79	96	the food	74	88
88	100	the adult	88	82
		Which of these phrases did you hear at the beginning of the ad		
25	37	Life is so empty	17	23
88	82	There's a burning from within	79	82
		Were all the voices the same or did you hear different voices? Circle the words that describe the voices you heard		
88	89	down, bored or sad	100	82
21	45	up, excited, happy, joking or laughing	8	41
		How do we find out what this ad is for? Do we see the advertiser's		
58	73	name	73	86
25	74	logo	73	73
		Does the advertiser have		
54	62	a jingle	58	52
8	16	special colors	12	18
63	54	a famous spokesperson	62	67
		If I went to Boston Market my order would		
63	67	look the same	81	76
50	52	cost the same	60	76
38	28	taste the same	23	45

More students seemed to be able to see details at the completion of this investigation. This is particularly noticeable in the morning group. In the pre survey, 79% noticed the food and 88% noticed the man was in color compared to 96% and 100% in the post survey.

Students in both classes still tended to miss the initial phrase "life is so empty," spoken by one teen though the percentage that did hear it increased. Interestingly the percentage of students who now noticed the tone of the adult voice more than doubled. If this was simply the result of their hearing the same advertisement for the second time, one would have expected a parallel increase in the percentage that recorded the first teen phrase but this is not the case. For example, in the afternoon group's pre survey only 8% seem to hear the adult voice compared to 41% in the post survey whereas the increase for the "life is so empty" phrase was a modest 6% (from 17% to 23%). Another possibility would seem to be that they were beginning to see that there was more to the ad than the teens. They were beginning to distance themselves from the ad and examine it rather than live it.

In terms of product identifiers the afternoon class once again fared a little better than the morning though there was more movement in the morning class. Initially only 25% saw the *Boston Market* logo but on the post survey 74% recorded seeing it. Their awareness of the product clearly increased.

Ability to Interpret Messages

Once again, the category "everyone" was most frequently selected for the target audience. The morning group, however did show some movement in this area. On the initial survey 79% selected everyone compared to 59% on the post survey and those who changed their minds now selected teen girls and guys as the target group.

The afternoon group remained firm with their initial choices as to whom the man in the ad represented. The morning group changed their opinions, however. Initially the most favored category was TV announcer (63%) but this dropped to 48% while *Boston Market* manager rose from 33% to

52%. This suggests that they students were beginning to identify the spokesperson with the product rather than seeing him as a remote disinterested party.

When we asked the students to evaluate the ad's message about the cost, taste, and appearance of the food they could get at *Boston Market*, we got mixed results. The morning class remained pretty sure it would not look the same or cost the same but their opinions about whether it would taste the same fluctuated somewhat. On the pre-survey 13% said they thought it would taste the same, 38% did not think it would taste the same and 42% were uncertain. On the post-survey these numbers changed to 24%, 28%, and 48%. In other words some of those who initially did not think it would taste the same either changed their minds or were uncertain. The opinions of the afternoon class stayed pretty stable except that some people shifted from being uncertain as to whether the food would taste the same (54% to 40%) to thinking that it would not taste the same (23% to 45%).

Ability to Reflect on Meaning of Message in Terms of Peers and Themselves

There was an interesting shift in interpretation in both groups of the man's lying down with the teens at the end of the ad. Whereas initially 67% of the morning group responded that they thought he was making fun of the teens compared to only 21% who thought he wanted to talk to the teens or be like them this decreased to 48% thinking he was making fun of teens and 48% deciding he wanted to communicate with the teens or be like them. Similarly in the afternoon group the percentage that thought he was making fun of the teens decreased from 38% to 27% and the group that thought he wanted to communicate with the teens or be like them went from 46% to 73%. It appears that the more elements of the ad the students were able to identify, the more accurate they were at decoding the ad's meaning and the less they regarded the adult as an outsider and as critical of them.

Conclusions

Many of our findings parallel other research (e.g., Fox 1996).

- Most students process media messages at a basic informational level. There are few examples of critical or reflective discourse in our study. It may be the case that if students are encouraged to answer critical questions and ponder larger economic and political issues that surround the production of media, that they would respond more discursively.
- A teacher's questioning style is crucial in helping students to enter the reflective domain. Our data supplied us with some very good examples of how response chains influence this higher level of processing. Training teachers to ask open ended questions that require interpretive or reflective responses rather than shallow, informational Level 1 answers is clearly desirable.
- With limited funding we were able to conduct this pilot study which suggested that exposure to media literacy materials did improve the teen's observational skills as well as their ability to interpret constructed media messages.

Much of the literature in the field of Educational Communications and Technology is devoted to instructional technology as metacognitive tool or as tutor. There are studies that examine the extent to which technology as metcognitive tool, as augmenter of metacognition, qualitatively restructures thinking tasks (e.g., Salomon 1989, 1992). Other studies, for example, research of the *Writing Partner* discuss technology as tutor (Zellermayer, Salomon, Globerson & Givon 1991). There is a body of literature, however, that discusses instructional technology as a communications medium as a semiotic system (e.g., Streibel, 1986; Winograd, & Flores, 1986; Bowers, 1988; Salomon, 1994). It is within this literature that we are situating this study, media literacy as discourse. We are investigating how working with media literacy materials enhances metacognitive skills such as critical questioning and reflection.

In a recent lecture delivered by Sherry Turkle at the University of Washington Turkle said, "I'm no longer asking the question, 'what do children do **with** technology?' but rather, 'what does it do **to**

children?'"(1999, writers' emphasis). Turkle's question stresses the importance of considering the impact of technology as communications medium on all aspects of children's development. By situating our research within the technology as communications medium, as discourse, we are able to consider the impact media have on children and adolescents' "ways of talking, listening (often, too, reading and writing), acting, interpreting, believing, valuing, and using tools and objects in particular settings at specific times, so as to display and recognize a particular social identity." (Gee, 1996).

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